

The China Puzzle, Part III: One Step Forward and Two Steps Back?

Written by Margaret J. Nencheck, Guest Contributor
Monday, 26 March 2012 23:43



February 2012 marked the 40th anniversary of President Richard Nixon's historic trip to China. In hindsight, Nixon's decision to open relations with China is seen as one of the major diplomatic achievements of the latter half of the 20th century. Forty years later, a generation of Millennials is learning Mandarin, working and studying in China, and thinking deeply about the prospect of American decline in an Asian century. To mark this milestone, members of Young Professionals in Foreign Policy (YFPF), each with unique perspectives on China and East Asian affairs, gave their views on China's role in today's world. This is the third in a four-part series.

As we marked the 40th anniversary of President Richard Nixon's historic trip to China, the latest chapter of Sino-American relations unfolded with meetings between China's Vice President Xi Jinping and U.S. government officials, including President Barack Obama. While many praise this strengthening of dialogue between two world superpowers, especially given the darkening worldwide economic climate, not all aspects of these talks have been met with such favor.

The American military presence and strategy in the Far East has long been met with skepticism and distrust from the People's Republic of China, primarily due to U.S. support of the Taiwanese military. Likewise, the U.S. views the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with suspicion, not least of which stems from questions about Chinese defense expenditures. Official reports from the one-party state list the defense budget at approximately \$91.5 billion. However, U.S. estimates place Chinese spending at double this amount and predict increasing expenditures over the next three years.

An escalating Chinese defense budget, coupled with economic growth, is worrisome to many in

The China Puzzle, Part III: One Step Forward and Two Steps Back?

Written by Margaret J. Nencheck, Guest Contributor
Monday, 26 March 2012 23:43

the U.S. The growing deficit and impending defense budget cuts further exacerbate this military-economic tension. The morning before Xi met with Pentagon officials, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta told the Senate Armed Services Committee, “Rising powers in Asia are testing international rules and relationships ... We will rebalance our global posture and presence to emphasize Asia Pacific and the Middle East, because those areas represent the threats for the future.”

The budget reduction will force the U.S. to prioritize against the most dangerous threats, and while Panetta did not single out China specifically, the underlying tone seems to indicate that China may be at the top of that list.

China is expanding technologically, with planes, ships, and weapons possessing a greater reach and capability than they ever had before. Naval patrols continue to extend farther and farther from the mainland and are increasingly irritating – and threatening – to neighboring Pacific countries like Japan and Vietnam. To counter, American carrier groups conduct exercises in the South China Sea and talk about basing troops in Australia, further provoking the PLA. Any incident, such as the mid-air collision between a U.S. Navy EP-3 intelligence aircraft and a PLA J-8 fighter jet in 2001, has the potential to escalate and force one side or the other to cut off all dialogue completely. These fractures in the U.S.-China relationship take months to repair and cause countless political setbacks.

While continued political discussions are viewed as a step forward in strengthening the relationship between these two world powers, at this time, it may only be rhetoric. Meetings between Chinese and U.S. leaders called for increased trust, better understanding, and common strategic goals, but when it comes to the military, it may be hard to achieve on the ground – or the sea.

Margaret J. Nencheck is a former U.S. Army Intelligence Officer and graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, currently working as a contractor in the Intelligence Community.